

Transgressing the Borders of Art and Non-art: The Case of Elmerice Parts and Herman Kolt-Oginsky

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ABSTRACT

Modern dance made its way to Estonia in the 1910s. By putting on stage a new woman and picturing her in a new way, modern dance challenged many members of society, sometimes even being seen as disgraceful. In 1926 and 1927, Elmerice Parts (1878–1974) and Herman Kolt-Oginsky (1902–1977) created scandals with their dance numbers in Estonia. According to reviewers, the dancers transgressed the line between art and non-art. The artists were attacked for making use of acrobatic and “erotic” elements; not surprisingly, the latter aspect was seen more critically. The aim of this article is to understand where the line between art and non-art lay in the 1920s. I come to the conclusion that artfulness was associated predominantly with spirituality and the unconscious: When the dancer focused on bodily experiences and highlighted their physical body parts, it became non-art. The main source of information is articles published in print media in 1926 and 1927. I analysed the data using qualitative methods.

RESUMÉ

Den moderne dans kom til Estland i 1910'erne. Ved at vise en ny kvindetype, der agerede på en ny måde, på scenen, udfordrede den moderne dans dele af samfundet, og den blev endda af nogen, betragtet som skammelig. I 1926 og 1927 skabte Elmerice Parts (1878-1974) og Herman Kolt-Oginsky (1902-1977) skandale med deres dansenumre i Estland. Ifølge anmeldelserne overskred danserne grænsen mellem kunst og ikke-kunst. Kunstnerne blev klandret for at gøre brug af akrobatiske og “erotiske” elementer, og ikke overraskende blev sidstnævnte aspekt set mere kritisk på. Formålet med artiklen er at forstå, hvor grænsen mellem kunst og ikke-kunst lå i 1920'erne. Jeg er nået frem til den konklusion, at kunstaspektet overvejende var forbundet med spiritualitet og det ubevidste; når danseren fokuserede på kropslige oplevelser og fremhævede sine fysiske kropsdele, blev det til ikke-kunst. Data stammer primært fra artikler offentliggjort i trykte medier i 1926 og 1927. Jeg har analyseret data ved hjælp af kvalitativ forskningsmetode.

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Introduction

Modern dance was recognized as an art in Estonia in the 1920s. The new genre did not make its way to prestigious theatre stages without scandals and bans, though. The best known of these is the Gripenberg scandal,¹ a riot that broke out during a performance by Maggie Gripenberg, a Finnish dance pioneer, and Onni Gabriel in the city of Tartu in 1919. Few people know of the mid-to-late 1920s scandal involving Elmerice Parts and Herman Kolt-Oginsky. Articles for and against the duo filled the pages of Estonian newspapers and magazines in 1926 and 1927. According to several critics, Parts and Kolt-Oginsky's dances were "immoral", "inartistic," and therefore unsuitable for theatre stages. Due to moral grounds, the local education authority of Tartu even prohibited school students from attending their performance, and a rumour went around that city-dwellers planned to interrupt their performance with "rotten eggs, bats and caterwaul" (Aa. 1927). However, according to Parts (1926), her goal was not to alarm her audiences but to revive the art of dance in Estonia so that it stays in contact with contemporary life. Her and Kolt-Oginsky's efforts did not go completely unnoticed—many reviewers praised them for renewing local dance art.

For many people, nevertheless, the duo transgressed the line between art and non-art. Transgression is conduct which exceeds boundaries, breaks rules, or moves beyond conventions (Jenks 2003, 3; Wolfreys 2008, 3). This means that a transgressive act presupposes a rule or a norm, something to trespass on; otherwise, there would be no transgression. Often, we are unaware of the rules that guide us through our daily lives; when someone exceeds a certain boundary or crosses a certain line, the norm becomes visible. In other words, a transgressive act makes apparent what was primarily concealed and hidden. Becoming aware of the norm, on the other hand, allows us to analyse its origin: What

produced the rule? Examining Parts and Kolt-Oginsky's performances as transgressive acts means asking about dominant ideas about art or artfulness. What made modern dance "artful" in Estonia in the 1920s?

Elmerice Parts (b. Meyer, 1878–1974) was one of the first Estonian modern dancers. She studied harmonic gymnastics in 1913 with Hade Kallmeyer and in 1922 became a student and a dancer of Jutta Klamt.² Both Kallmeyer and Klamt taught in Berlin at that time. Parts began her career much like many early modern dancers—first as a gymnastics teacher and an advocate for women's health; she taught "aesthetic gymnastics" in her hometown Tartu in 1914 and 1915. At the time, modern dance was still in its formative years and intricately linked to gymnastics. To support their independent and creative lifestyles, many early movement enthusiasts worked as teachers. In 1920, Parts started an international career as a solo dancer, performing alongside Herman Kolt-Oginsky in 1926 and 1927. Her active dance career concluded in 1928, and she took up a career as a dance pedagogue specializing in creating stylized national dances. In 1945, Parts fled Soviet forces to Germany and later emigrated to the USA, where she stayed until her death. She was married to Kaarel Parts (1873–1940), the chief justice of Estonia from 1919 to 1940.

Herman (later Heigo or Heiko) Kolt-Oginsky (1902–1977) was born in Poland, his parents moved to Estonia in the 1910s. By the mid-1920s, he was a young, promising actor with some dance education. After performing with Parts, he studied with Ellys Gregor in Berlin and toured with various female dancers. At the beginning of the 1940s, Kolt-Oginsky became a recognized dancer and choreographer at the opera house in Graz, Austria. He continued his career in Belgium, where he founded the dance group Thor. According to Erik Verstraete (1987), he was regarded as the pioneer of a new, expressive art of dance and dynamic flag play.

Parts and Kolt-Oginsky primarily lived and

performed abroad, in the Weimar Republic, which was experiencing a remarkable cultural renaissance. The duo was undoubtedly attuned to the latest trends of the time. Their repertoire bore similarities to those of avant-gardists of the day, for example, to that of Anita Berber,³ probably the most notorious dancer in Germany, whose repertoire contained pieces like *Kokaine (Cocaine)* and *Tänze des Lasters (Dances of Vice)*, and that of Gertrud Bodenwieser, an Austrian dancer known for *Dämon Maschine (Demon Machine)*. These works explored themes like the rise of mechanization, excessive alcohol and drug use, and the loosening of social norms, particularly for women.

This article examines the question of artfulness by analysing the scandal the duo caused in Estonia. The case study research aims to answer this question: What did critics consider art and what not? My research began by gathering data about the performances from both physical archives (Estonian Theatre and Music Museum, Deutsches Tanzarchiv Köln) and digital sources (DIGAR, arthistoricum.net). In Estonian-language print media, I found a substantial number of articles, sixty-four, mostly introducing the dancers before their performance, along with thirteen reviews and two polemic articles about the role of acrobatics and eroticism in modern dance, one article written by Parts, four playbills, and three pictures. The most relevant sources of information regarding the aim of the research are the reviews. To give a valid interpretation of the results of the analysis, it is important to link it to established literature and prior studies, as well as to the specific context and location of the study.

Discourse analysis was used to analyse the reviews, focusing on what critics found artistic or inartistic. The dancers were attacked preliminarily for two reasons: first, for being too “erotic” and, second, for making use of acrobatic elements. The critics considered both acrobatics as well as “eroticism” inartistic. In other words, for many people, it was the presence of these elements that defined the line between art and non-art: Had Parts and Kolt-Oginsky avoided these elements, critics would have considered their dance numbers artistic.

The next two sections explore the theme of “eroticism.” First, I will examine its positive aspects, as eroticism was not viewed entirely negatively. Then, I will shift focus to its more controversial, “bad” side. The

third section delves into critiques surrounding the use of acrobatic elements in performance. Before concluding, I will ask whether the scandal surrounding both “eroticism” and acrobatics was driven by societal concerns about the body.

I. Erotic and artistic

Accusations of being immorally erotic probably came as a surprise to Elmerice Parts, as eroticism and sensuality were not anything new or unexpected on the modern dance stage—nor were they absent from her repertoire. Among her solo dances, for instance, one finds a sensual *Dance of Salomé*⁴ (1921), of which a new version was titled *Eroticism* (1923). Not only did Parts represent sensual figures, but she also defined her art through eroticism by claiming that eroticism was her “element” (“Ungari lehtede...” 1924). Nonetheless, her dancing was considered artistic, and, as a matter of fact, by the mid-1920s, she was one of the most praised and acknowledged dancers and choreographers in Estonia. This indicates that being sensual on the theatre stage did not necessarily mean that the boundary between art and non-art had been transgressed. So, what made Parts’ “eroticism” artistic?

The earliest modern dancers, both in Estonia and elsewhere, drew inspiration from two primary sources: ancient Greece and the “Orient.” Many of them encountered Antiquity through Delsartism, a movement named after the French teacher François Delsarte (Järvinen 2023). Around the same time, growing interest in non-European cultures led to performances that portrayed Eastern cultures in ways that were often exoticized and eroticized (Miettinen 2023). From today’s perspective, both of these representations are problematic, as the researchers show; the idealization of ancient Greece is linked to the pseudoscientific racism of the beginning of the last century, while depictions of the “Orient” reflect a process of othering.

As historian Edward Ross Dickinson (2011, 98) has claimed, these images of the ancient world offered two contrasting modes or “keys” for dance: the refined and spiritual, and the erotic and expressive. The “Orient” was imagined back then as a primitive and sexually loaded place. “Oriental” figures permitted dancers to embody passion and sensuality according to contemporary cultural stereotypes (Dickinson 2011, 102). For Europeans, the “Orient” constituted “an imagined space of primitive, primal, ‘real’ experience, an antidote to the

constraint, rationality, and consequent incapacity for the unmediated experience of the self that many understood to be increasingly (and oppressively) central to Western life,” as Dickinson (2011, 113) has pointed out. This does not mean, though, that all “Oriental” dances were erotic.

Ancient Greek dances, on the other hand, were associated with chasteness and an asexual body. For many, classical sculpture defined the ideal of beauty and gave modern dance a lofty character. Dickinson (2011, 110) has also pointed to the vicious circle of simulations: ancient Greek-themed dances were considered chaste because the dancers were simulating statues by being genuinely naked; statues, on the other hand, were considered chaste because they were only simulations. Modern dance rendered nudity as beautiful and not as sexy (Dickinson 2011, 109).

Ancient Greek dances were not considered chaste by everyone all at once, at least not in Estonia. The question of chasteness was raised most clearly in connection with Maggie Grippenberg’s performances in Estonia in 1913. The reviews and articles written in support of her allow us to see that many considered her dancing at that time sinful and unchaste (see e.g. R. S. 1913; “Paruness Maggie ...” 1913); for this reason, it was forbidden for the pupils of the city Pärnu to attend her solo dance performance (ik. 1913). Similarly, Isadora Duncan’s early performances were often interpreted in erotic terms (Järvinen 2023). Deployment of classical Greek references was not unique to dance performance in this period: bodybuilders, athletes, and filmmakers used the same vocabulary (Dickinson 2011, 101).

As dancers drew inspiration from historical sources, modern dance obtained a museal (Brandstetter 1995, 58–97) or archaeological (Dickinson 2011) character. Because of the museal character of the style, the dancer was not perceived as herself on stage; instead, she was believed to be a figure from another time and place and not a “real” woman. This is why her dances were not considered transgressive: The museal character made it possible for the spectators to accept the Greek and “Oriental” dances as art, regardless of the sensuality of the represented figures and the scarce dresses.

As shown in this section, neither sensual figures nor bare skin was considered scandalous on the theatre stage at the beginning of the last century. Therewith, the question concerning Parts and Kolt-Oginsky’s work becomes even more intriguing: Why were they



Fig 1. Elmerice Parts and Herman Kolt-Oginsky performing together. Photo: Zander and Labisch. The photo was published in a German magazine called UHU in November 1926.

considered so alarming?

II. Erotic, therefore, inartistic

Altogether, thirteen reviews were published about Parts and Kolt-Oginsky’s performances in Estonian-language press media: six in 1926 (four positive, two negative) and seven in 1927 (three positive, four negative). It is impossible to say how many reviews, if any, were written by women, as the identities of only half of the reviewers are known. The reviewers’ opinions could not differ more profoundly: while one reviewer (L-d. 1927) claimed that their dances barely contained “eroticism,” another (Rumor 1927) accused the duo of pornography. It is important to mention that eroticism was mentioned only by the reviewers who were critical of the duo, whereas the reviewers with a positive attitude towards the dancers did not discuss the topic.⁵ Parts’ connection with eroticism was by no means a critics’ illusion. In an article written as an answer to Rasmus Kangro-Pool’s critical review, she (1926) stated that one of her and Kolt-Oginsky’s aims was to express “erotic enthuse.” While Parts undeniably had an interest in eroticism, it is

doubtful that her dances were pornographic.

Let us now see what the reviewers regarded as “erotic.” In *Woman*, Parts “moved her breasts voluptuously while pulling her shoulders together” and “made snakelike movements with her hips like a belly dancer.” Both dancers “kept their mouths half-open” while dancing as a signal of strong passion, the critic (R. K.-P. 1927) guessed. According to an unidentified critic (“Parts-Oginsky tantsuõhtu” 1927), “Parts distorted her mouth and eyes by pulling them, twisted the middle of her body, and opened her legs.”

The relationship between eroticism and modern dance was discussed most thoroughly by Rasmus Kangro-Pool, alias R. K.-P., a literature and theatre critic, and by the writer Johannes Semper, and, in view of this, I will concentrate on the following mainly on their writings. The two were keenly interested in contemporary theatre and dance. During their study years in Germany (Kangro-Pool studied in Heidelberg and Hamburg between 1920 and 1924, and Semper in Berlin from 1921 to 1925), both had a great opportunity to get to know the newest trends.

Neither rejected nor denied eroticism on stage. Semper (1926) even stated that eroticism was an integral part of the art of dance by declaring: “Eroticism is the origin of art and a secret source of half of human actions.” The critics’ problem with Parts and Kolt-Oginsky’s dances was not the presence of eroticism or sensuality, but how it was presented. In other words, the critics did not blame the dancers for creating erotic dances but for presenting eroticism “wrongly,” this means in an inartistic way. Semper (1926) accused the duo of creating dances that contained “remelted nature and temperament,” while Kangro-Pool (1927) for displaying “inner urges.” According to the central thesis of the critics (Semper 1926; R. K.-P. 1927), Parts and Kolt-Oginsky had failed to transform or redesign eroticism into art, and they also claimed that the spectator is left with the impression that the dances were too realistic or lifelike. What the critics meant by “art” or “artful,” remains unclear, though. However, Semper drops us a hint by comparing Parts with Edith von Schrenck.

Schrenck was a German-Baltic dancer who performed in Estonia shortly after Parts and Kolt-Oginsky. According to Semper (1926), eroticism “manifested itself [in Schrenck’s dances] in the frame of art.” The statement is interesting, as Schrenck was by

no means a sensual dancer; on the contrary, her dances seem to have presented something unearthly and lofty. The critics of her time (Bergmann 1926; Wgh. 1926) compared her with a girl or a child, and according to them she portrayed “soul experiences.” The dance historian Karl Toepfer (1997, 163, 166) claims that one of Schrenck’s trademarks was seriousness, favouring dances of a tragic, melancholy, or elegiac character. No dancer seems to be further from sensuality and eroticism than Edith von Schrenck. This raises the question: What could have Semper considered erotic in her dances?

The answer is: her physical body. In his article, Semper (1926) claims that the material used by the dancer to express herself—her body—is “already in itself more erotic than any other material: a word, sound, marble or colour.” Therefore, for Semper, eroticism was an integral or essential part of a physical body; according to him, all bodies were erotic. Semper’s ideas echo in Kangro-Pool’s (R. K.-P. 1927) review published a year later.

When both Schrenck’s and Parts’ creations were regarded as erotic, why were Schrenck’s dances considered artistic and Parts’ not? What sets the two apart is how eroticism is presented in their works. Schrenck’s repertoire did not entail dances with sensual content, meaning that her eroticism was subtle, hidden, and veiled. In contrast, Parts and Kolt-Oginsky’s eroticism was not. One should suppress eroticism, Semper (1926) explains, and not “underline” or highlight it as the duo did. For the art of dance to be artistic, its material—the body—had to be tamed, and curbed. In other words, the body had to be freed from overt sexuality. Only a dance piece with hidden or concealed eroticism was considered artistic, so their dances were declared non-art. Eroticism was unacceptable as itself on stage; it had to be altered, given a different form in order to be accepted as art. Semper (1926) states in his article that the artist needs to “transform” eroticism before it gets integrated into art; with other words, eroticism should become something else before it becomes part of art; something different from what it already was. Here too eroticism is kept at distance and not allowed to exist here and now similarly to sensual “Oriental” dances.

Semper’s ideas are very similar to ones expressed by Rudolf von Laban, a hugely influential choreographer and dance theorist who was already known in the Weimar Republic during Semper’s years there. It is probable that Semper was familiar with Laban’s book

Die Welt des Tänzers, published in 1920. Laban (1920, 157–58), similarly to Semper, differentiated between an “erotic work of art” and a dance performance with “erotic content.” Neither assigned any artistic quality to the latter. According to Laban, the aim of a dance performance with “erotic content” was to arouse the spectator. The similarities between Semper’s and Laban’s ideas make apparent where Semper’s ideas and convictions about art originate. Kangro-Pool’s (1924a,b) positive attitude towards Laban’s theories is manifested in his reviews of dance performances by Gerd Negro, who was a former student and dancer of Laban.

By insisting that eroticism remain hidden and transformed into something else, the critics asserted a certain authority. Schrenck’s eroticism was independent of her: She was considered erotic by the critic not because she presented on stage a sensual figure or an erotic scene but because of her body—something that was inseparable from her. The explanation was simple: Eroticism is intrinsic to the human body. Parts and Kolt-Oginsky, on the other hand, depicted sensual scenes. This means that the nature of the performance (erotic/unerotic) did not depend on the spectator anymore. Additionally, sensual content made it clear that the (female) dancer was aware of her sensuality. When spectators were confronted with overtly sensual figures or erotic scenes, the performance was seen as inartistic. In short, “appropriate eroticism” gave the spectator a chance to perceive and see something as erotic, whereas “inappropriate eroticism” did not. In the latter case, the spectator was expected to accept the choreographer’s artistic decision to depict erotic subject matter and show what hitherto had stayed veiled. In this case, the roles reverse: The spectator, whose gaze until then had defined sensuality, is now left without agency: They either have to accept the creation as it is (and that is erotic) or declare it non-art. It is the question of the artistic freedom of a female choreographer that is at stake here.

As evidence, the critics did not attack the eroticism in Parts and Kolt-Oginsky’s dances, rather it was the way the duo presented eroticism that was found alarming: the staginess and embeddedness of the sensuality; the fact that the dancers were aware of the erotic nature of their dances. And this constituted the border-crossing.

III. Acrobatic, therefore, inartistic

Parts and Kolt-Oginsky were not only attacked for alleged eroticism but also for the use of acrobatic elements. True, this fact gained less attention from the critics and was not discussed as fiercely. Once again, not all the reviewers were critical of the use of acrobatic elements. Altogether eleven out of thirteen reviewers acknowledged the presence of acrobatic elements; many of them (“Elmerice Partsi ja...” 1926; J. K. 1926; Linde 1926a,b; Mettus 1926; W. M-s. 1927) were positive that the acrobatic elements enriched the dances and were artistically justified, while the opponents were convinced that acrobatic elements stood apart from the whole and “did not enable an artistic whole to be formed” (Os Ri. 1926). For the reviewers, the author of the dances was Parts; it can be assumed, though, that the idea to integrate acrobatic elements in the movements came from Kolt-Oginsky. His choreographic works produced for the opera Graz in the 1940s prove his interest in the genre. As his father was a circus artist, he was acquainted with the circus from an early age.

Among the movements that the critics considered acrobatic were, for example, a headstand, a cartwheel, and a piggyback ride (Semper 1926). Unquestionably, many considered dance lifts acrobatic. One of these lifts was described as follows (“Elmerice Partsi ja...” 1926): “Parts wrapped herself around her partner while he formed pirouettes without holding on to her.” Acrobatics were associated additionally with “technical” (B. A. 1927), “imitative” (Os Ri. 1926), or “mechanized” dances (Linde 1926b). In *Machine nr 13* (also *Machine*), the dancers embodied a machine by “displaying mechanical movements and postures” (“Parts-Oginsky tantsuõhtu” 1927). In *Morphium b*, the duo depicted “morphine’s weakening and destructive effect on the human body and soul with feeble convulsive movements and facial expressions” (W. M-s. 1926). The opponents of the duo considered all acrobatic elements inartistic, claiming that they belonged to the circus arena (R. K.-P. 1926; Os Ri. 1926). (The only critic who saw similarities to the circus but did not consider it negative was Bernhard Linde [1926b].) An even bigger problem constituted for some critics the “imitative” or “technical” dances like *Machine nr 13* that, according to Kangro-Pool (R. K.-P. 1926), were “in discordance with artistic requirements.”

What was the problem with imitateness?

If the dancer's goal is to create an illusion or imitate an action, an unidentified critic (Os Ri. 1926) explained, dance becomes a matter of "rational technique and spiritless acrobatics, jumping, hemming and hawing." It was believed that "high" art should express inner feelings or the unconscious and not see as its aim reproducing, that is, copying already existent movements. There are two aspects that the opponents were critical about. First, when a dancer reconstructs a real-life object (like a machine), she is using her mind (and not trying to connect with her inside). Second, "proper" dance art should not deal with real-life objects or situations; instead, it should focus on the hidden inner (not the exterior) world. Making real-life objects a subject of dance meant turning the gaze to the outer world and giving real objects an importance and visibility that was unusual at the time. This means that imitating or copying was considered by the opponents as *per se* an inappropriate method.

As shown, Parts and Kolt-Oginsky's opponents expected the art of dance to be soulful, to express the unconscious and inner experiences. Acrobatic elements, on the other hand, focused on the choreographer's constructivist abilities and prioritized performativity over expressiveness; additionally, they dealt with the exterior world. It can be said that both the method (imitation) and the subject matter (exterior world) of their dances were perceived as border-crossing by their opponents.

IV. The body problem

I believe that the accusations against Parts and Kolt-Oginsky had something to do with prevailing ideas about the human body. Behind the claims made for eroticism and acrobatics lurked the conviction that the body and bodily experiences did not belong to the theatre stage. In other words, it was the "body-centredness" of their art that probably disturbed some spectators (and not necessarily eroticism or acrobatics); the duo's decision to contradict the idea of the body as something low or dirty and, hence, inappropriate for "high" art.

In modern dance, the body of a dancer was considered a tool or an instrument (Klein 1992, 183; Kolb 2009, 96) rather than a source of inspiration or an object of study. This is intriguing considering the fact that modern dance made the body—especially the female

body—more visible than before. Dance was associated at the time with the search for archaic structures "underneath" or "beyond" culture and rationality (Kolb 2009, 45–46). The new philosophy of movement sought to establish a connection between body movement and the depths of human consciousness (Kolb 2009, 97). A female dancer was considered particularly suitable for this purpose, as a woman was believed to have preserved the exceptional harmony between the body and soul, and that made her "uniquely qualified to lend an exterior, physiological shape to her interior self" (Kolb 2009, 102). Edith von Schrenck, who the reviewers contrasted with Parts, seems to have been exactly that kind of dancer.

Parts and Kolt-Oginsky's "material," on the other hand, was not the unconscious or inner truth. Instead, their gaze was turned towards physical bodies, both human and non-human (Parts stressing her womanliness by moving her breasts; copying the movements of a machine) and bodily experiences (effect of a drug). The body, instead of being a tool, an unavoidable element of the art of dance, became a subject of interest, an area of focus. Parts and Kolt-Oginsky's bodies were not part of an ancient time and place; on the contrary, they belonged to the contemporary world. Instead of a museal figure, a real wo/man stood on stage. This means that it became impossible for spectators to ignore the dancer's physical body. And this is what ensued, in my opinion, uproar. As already pointed out, the human body was considered dirty, low, and not worthy of being a subject of "high" art.

As shown above, the dancer's physical body (the one not wrapped in the veil of antique chasteness) was perceived as erotic and therefore held the potential to sexually arouse the spectator—something that "high" art should never do (Semper 1926; Laban 1920, 157–58). It was the body, again, that constituted the problem, but this time it was the spectator's body. Being sexually aroused or excited means to be affected, or influenced by someone (even if there is no physical contact between the bodies); It means that someone's body has an effect on someone else's body by impacting and influencing it. The act carries with itself an invading, trespassing character (despite the fact that the feeling might be positive): It means that someone has reached someone else's body, crossed a certain neutral border between two people and therewith evoked certain feelings.

I believe that Parts and Kolt-Oginsky's artistic work

was declared inartistic because the duo gave the body and bodily experiences in their dances a central role, making the body uncommonly visible. This discomfort was hidden behind the accusations of “eroticism” and acrobatics. The dancers’ oeuvre went against the norm: The dancers saw the body as a source of inspiration (not an instrument) and considered bodily experiences appropriate for the theatre stage. The debate over the artistic value of Parts and Kolt-Oginsky’s performances reveals that a performance was considered artistic when it enabled the spectator to ignore the dancer’s physical body on stage. When the dancer, on the other hand, highlighted her/his physicality or depicted bodily experiences (instead of the unconscious), the dance number was regarded as inartistic.

Although modern dance gave a female dancer many privileges connected to her physical body (among them the freedom to decide on movements, themes, and dresses), she had to disregard and ignore her corporeality, her “bodyness.” As shown, the body of the female dancer was accepted on stage only as an instrument, a tool for visualizing inner experiences. Elmerice Parts and Herman Kolt-Oginsky challenged these ideas and norms with their dance numbers, thereby putting into question the border between “high” and “low” art.

Conclusion

As claimed at the beginning of the article, a transgressive act makes one aware of surrounding norms and rules that might otherwise remain disguised. The scandal caused by Elmerice Parts and Herman Kolt-Oginsky with their performances highlights the boundaries of art. First and foremost, that there is no one way of defying the domain of art or artfulness. As has been shown, what some reviewers considered transgressive and, therefore, inartistic, was seen by others as an attempt to renew the art of dance in Estonia. In their eyes, the dancers did not cross artistic boundaries; rather, they expanded them. This confirms what Chris Jenks (2013, 2–3) has noted: Transgressions are context-specific and vary considerably across social and temporal spaces.

The criticism against the duo centred on two main points: the use of acrobatic and “erotic” elements. However, what exactly was meant by “eroticism” and acrobatics remains unclear. The opponents’ conservative and rigid stance on eroticism on the modern dance stage

was influenced by Rudolf von Laban’s ideas. This scandal reveals that there were rules and norms a dancer had to follow if they wanted to be considered a “serious” artist. Early modern dance, although sometimes referred to as “free dance,” did not free a dancer from all the rules. It is important to note that the critiques we have today were predominantly written by male reviewers, offering us a limited, gendered perspective on the controversy.

Based on the findings of this article, I conclude that the opponents were mainly troubled by the “body-centredness” of Parts and Kolt-Oginsky’s repertoire. Through acrobatic and erotic elements, they depicted physical experiences (*Morphium b*), stressed their body parts (*Woman*), and imitated a machine (*Machine nr 13*). Their interest in real-world physical bodies diverged from the dominant ideas about modern dance that urged them to see visualizations of unconscious layers or inner experiences on stage, where her/his body served as a tool for this expression. But the dancers did not aim to reveal something that was hidden inside them—instead, they presented bodily experiences; The meaning of a dance number was inscribed on the dancers’ moving bodies. In this way, the spectator was confronted more than ever with the dancer’s physical and corporeal existence.

This artistic tension can be framed as a conflict between the representative regime (also referred to as the poetic regime) and the aesthetic regime of art, as described by Jacques Rancière in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. According to Rancière (2013, 17), the representative regime is normative: It contains definitions “according to which imitations can be recognized as exclusively belonging to an art and assessed, within this framework, as good or bad, adequate or inadequate.” The aesthetic regime, on the other hand, frees art from “any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres” (2013, 18–19). As I have shown, Parts and Kolt-Oginsky’s opponents were convinced that not everything can be regarded as artistic, instead, there are elements that are inartistic per se—a viewpoint that the artists clearly did not share. As the first stance is common to the representative regime, the latter characterizes the aesthetic regime of art. The significance of the aesthetic regime lies in its power to transform the distribution of the sensible established by the representative regime. In other words, the aesthetic regime can redefine “who can have a share in what is common to the community based

on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed" (Rancière 2013, 8).

It is difficult to give a final assessment of the duo. As half of the reviews written about them were positive, it is possible to say that by presenting new elements (acrobatics and eroticism), they succeeded—at least partly—in “transforming the distribution of the sensible,” that is, changing the general understanding of “high” art. On the other hand, the absence of successors points to the limited long-term impact of their artistic contributions. One should not forget that, at the same time, Estonia was undergoing a shift towards nationalism, a cultural tide that may have further constrained the duo’s influence and the reception of their ideas.

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Endnotes

- 1 Maggie Gripenberg (1881–1976), a student of Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, inspired many Estonian early modern dancers. A brawl that ended Gripenberg and Gabriel's performance in 1919 was provoked by a group of Estonian writers and artists. Allegedly, their dances were not as artful and original as expected. For more details, see: Anneli Saro, "Maggie Gripenbergi külalisetendused Tartus," *101 Eesti teatrisündmust* (Varrak, 2017), 64–65. For a thorough analysis see: Tõnis Tatar, "Gripenbergi skandaal kui avangardistliku aktsionismi ilming," *Kunstiteaduslikke uurimusi* 1–2 (2022): 77–101.
- 2 Elmerice Parts' connection to Jutta Klamt is not unproblematic, as Klamt was willing to compromise her style to the aesthetic and political dogma of the Nazis. Not only did Parts study with her in the early 1920s, but she also taught at her school during World War II. It is a topic that, without doubt, needs further investigation.
- 3 Concerning Anita Berber as avant-garde artist, see: Ulrike Wohler, "Tanz zwischen Avantgarde und Klassischer Moderne: Anita Berber und Mary Wigman," *Avantgarden und Politik. Künstlerischer Aktivismus von Dada bis zur Postmoderne* (transcript, 2009), 67–88; Alexandra Kolb, *Performing Femininity: Dance and Literature in German Modernism* (Peter Lang, 2009) 06–215.
- 4 The dance was initially created for a theatre production called *Salome* with Elmerice Parts in the leading role. Oscar Wilde's play premiered at the Drama Theatre in Tallinn in 1919. The figure of Salome was very popular at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century and inspired many dancers to create their own versions of Salome's "veil dance."
- 5 The only exception was Bernhard Linde (1926b), who considered their dances "erotic" but was not critical about it.

BIOGRAPHY

Anne-Liis Maripuu is a doctoral student at the University of Tartu. Her main field of research is modern dance in Estonia and Germany before World War II. She has published articles dedicated to Estonian dance history in multiple publications. In order to promote and popularize the research field, Maripuu has organized conferences and curated photo exhibitions in cooperation with the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum and the Estonian Association of Theatre Researchers and Theatre Critics.

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